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Abstract

Passing along the 'brightly — almost garishly — painted houses' of the West Indians, Mark Ainger, the male protagonist of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, an Anglican priest, remembers that it was in this street that his wife Sophia once saw 'a cluster of what she took to be exotic tropical fruits in one of the windows, only to realise that they were tomatoes put there to ripen. "Love apples", she had said to Mark, and the words "love apple" had somehow given a name to the district, strange and different as it was from the rest of the parish which lay over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line' (16).

ORNA RAZ

‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’: The West Indians and the Church in *An Unsuitable Attachment* by Barbara Pym

Passing along the ‘brightly — almost garishly — painted houses’ of the West Indians, Mark Ainger, the male protagonist of *An Unsuitable Attachment*, an Anglican priest, remembers that it was in this street that his wife Sophia once saw ‘a cluster of what she took to be exotic tropical fruits in one of the windows, only to realise that they were tomatoes put there to ripen. “Love apples”, she had said to Mark, and the words “love apple” had somehow given a name to the district, strange and different as it was from the rest of the parish which lay over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line’ (16).

This anecdote captures the ambiguous representation of West Indian immigrants in *An Unsuitable Attachment*, the novel that the English novelist Barbara Pym (1913–1980) wrote between 1960 and 1963 but was unable to publish in her lifetime. Between 1949 and 1963 Pym wrote six of her twelve novels. It was the most productive period of her literary career. These novels realistically document a decade in which Britain moved from post-war austerity to relative affluence, and underwent a series of dramatic social, cultural and demographic changes. Most of Pym’s novels centre on the ‘church, and the life that [goes] on around it’ (1984 31) and her portrayal of the Church of England is often cited by church scholars as reliable historical and social testimony.¹ In their conversations, her characters routinely refer to topical issues that occupy contemporaneous public discourse, and offer subtle commentary on cultural issues, church matters and social trends.

In her interest in social issues Pym continues the strong English tradition of novelists, poets and literary critics (Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, William Thackeray, and F. R. Leavis, among others) who were engaged in ‘implicit sociology’ (Kumar 44, 55).

Mistaking the tomatoes for ‘exotic tropical fruits’ and subsequently renaming the ‘strange and different’ district to ‘Love Apple’ hints, on one level, at the less than ordinary tradition associated with tomatoes (imported from South America to Europe as *pome dei Moro* and later called by the French *pommes d’amour* either as a corrupt translation or because of its alleged aphrodisiac properties) and endows the scene with an air of cosmopolitan excitement. Yet, the transformation of the tomatoes gives an additional level of meaning to this scene: Sophia’s confusion may be seen as a genuine error. It also suggests however, her fear of the unknown and her anxiety regarding the overt sensuality of the strangers.

The sociologist Georg Simmel defines ‘stranger’ as a person who comes today and stays tomorrow; whose position in a group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning; and that he imports qualities into it which do not and cannot stem from the group itself (402). In the England of the 1950s and the early 1960s the ‘exotic’ West Indian immigrants were strangers whose labour ‘was welcome’ but ‘their presence in large numbers in “one’s own” residential area was often not’ (Hastings 510).²

This essay offers a close reading of the passages in *An Unsuitable Attachment* that depict the West Indians in the North London parish of St. Basil. In order to achieve a better understanding of the cultural climate and discourse of the time, I use, whenever possible, sources written during the 1950s and early 1960s — at the risk of citing views that may now be perceived as outdated or politically incorrect.³ Placing that immigration, as depicted in the novel, in its historical context, I shall demonstrate that Pym’s representation of the West Indians in general and their relationship with the Church in particular is never as transparent as it seems at first reading. Moreover, while reflecting on the ambivalence of the English toward the newcomers, Pym subtly criticises the way they were received in that society in the early 1960s. *An Unsuitable Attachment* is set in a north-west London parish. Rather than focusing on a main protagonist, Pym presents an array of characters who are connected to the parish church — the priest, his wife, her sister and two new members of the congregation. In terms of plot, like most of Pym’s stories nothing dramatic ever happens, but the book explores the theme of attachment suitable and less-suitable among the married and unmarried characters. The novel provides an accurate picture of life in London in the early 1960s and reflects the social and cultural changes that have taken place in Britain since the end of the war.

Although cultural and racial diversity had existed to a certain degree in Britain before the Second World War, it was in the post-war society that the ‘presence of non-white people’ and the ‘wide measure of cultural diversity which they have brought with them’ became more visible (Royle 15).⁴ The 1948 British Nationality Act, which passed to standardise Commonwealth citizenship laws, confirmed the right of all citizens of the British Commonwealth and Colonies to settle in England (Inwood 854). After the war, the West Indians were the first group of coloured immigrants to come to the UK in significant number. (The sailing of the Empire Windrush from Kingston Jamaica in June 1948 marked the beginning this new era.) As a result of the ‘open door’ principle enshrined in the 1948 British Nationality Act, the number of immigrants from ‘underdeveloped countries’ — mainly from the West Indies and India and Pakistan — reached approximately 21,000 in 1959; 58,000 in 1960; and 136,000 in 1961 (Butler 205).

As early as 1950, the British Council of Churches urged the churches and their congregations to take every opportunity to promote the welfare of non-European students and workers. After the Notting Hill riots of 1958, the Executive Committee of the Council of Churches issued a strong statement condemning race prejudice and hostility (Patterson 1969: 325; Glass 148), and expressing its opposition to any restriction on immigration. Yet at the same time, Ruth Glass notes the silence of the 'Lords Spiritual' on that matter (147–48).

From 1955 until 1962, 260,000 Caribbean immigrants entered the country — nearly 75,000 in 1961 alone. Immigration control was imposed in 1962 with the passing of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act, which limited entrance to Britain.

The West Indians were keenly conscious of their status as Christians and British citizens.⁵ They spoke English, and their education was focused on Britain — their 'mother country' — and on its history. The church, often the Anglican Church, had played a significant role in their lives in their home country, and their social values had been modelled after those of British society. West Indians who relocated to Britain referred to themselves as 'migrants' rather than 'immigrants', pointing out that since they were British citizens their 'migration [was] essentially the same as internal migration within the British Isles'. As Glass suggests, they arrived in Britain fully expecting to be integrated into the new society, believing that their life in the West Indies had taught them what to expect in England (Glass 95).

The population in England, as reflected in Pym's first post-war novel *Excellent Women* (1949–51) is still ethnically homogeneous. In this novel foreigners appear only once — the heroine Mildred Lathbury and a co-worker Mrs. Bonner encounter two Indian students in a cafeteria. Mildred describes them as 'harmless enough' and they keep calling each other 'old boy' in the traditional English fashion (75), yet, they attract the attention of Mrs. Bonner who is somewhat apprehensive about sitting at the same table with them.

Immigrants and foreigners start appearing in Pym's work more frequently in the mid-1950s. In *No Fond Return of Love* (1957–60) foreigners are mentioned as suffering from racial discrimination; the heroine, Dulcie Mainwaring, worries about 'lonely African students [who are] having doors shut in their faces' (12). Jerry White argues that for white Londoners of the time, West Africans and West Indians were all 'black strangers' (160).

By the early 1960s, the period when *An Unsuitable Attachment* takes place, West Indian immigrants constituted a significant percentage of the population of St. Basil's, the fictional North London parish.⁶ At the time, West Indians often experienced great difficulties in their search for lodgings in Britain. Clifford Hill, a minister who worked closely with the immigrants, testifies that in house-after-house they were met with 'we don't take niggers', or were politely informed that

been by-passed because of their location — near a railway, a noisy market' (Glass 48). These observations are echoed in *An Unsuitable Attachment* in which the immigrants live at 'the fringe of [the] parish, that part that would never become residentially "desirable" because it was too near the railway and many of the big gaunt houses had been taken over by families of West Indians' (16).

Other social processes taking place in London are also reflected in Pym's description of St. Basil's parish. At the same time that one part of the district was deteriorating, another part of the parish was being rejuvenated. Two of the main characters, Ianthe Broome and Rupert Stonebird, moved there and live 'over the other side of the main road, far from the railway line' (16) in the newly renovated part of the parish. Ianthe and Rupert represent upper middle-class English people who returned to town from the suburbs and sought small terrace houses that had been 'bought up by speculative builders, gutted, modernised, and sold at high prices to people who wanted small houses that were almost in town but could not afford the more fashionable districts' (16). Here Pym refers to the growing trend of middle and upper classes to return from suburbia to town. The combination of immigration and 'gentrification' in London made the mixing of races easier in some cases (White 160).

Yet, in this novel, in spite of geographical proximity, contact between the different residents of the parish is never established. Pym's description reflects the findings of a nation-wide Gallup poll carried out on September 1958 when the riots in London were still going on. This survey revealed that 61% of the people asked said they would definitely move or might possibly move 'if coloured people came to live in great numbers' in their district. There was a clear distinction between those who knew coloured people personally and were definitely more tolerant and those who did not (Glass 125).

Moreover, although the West Indians have been in the parish longer than the owners of the renovated houses, they are still referred to as 'strangers', 'newcomers' and 'exotic' (22). A description of a busy commercial street in the parish provides an opportunity to test the reaction of an outside visitor — Lady Selvedge, who arrives from the country:

'So many *black* people,' said Lady Selvedge in her penetrating voice. 'And do I see *yams* on that stall? I don't think the vicarage can be *here*' ...

'I thought I saw Yams on one of the vegetable stalls as we were coming along,' said Lady Selvedge. 'It reminded me of our time in Nigeria. Humphrey was there, you know'. (62–63)

This scene illustrates the conclusions of a report published by the Fabian Colonial Bureau. In a section titled 'Origin of Hostility', this study found that the status of colonial migrants was determined by three factors: first, as the West Indian or African migrant is a coloured person, he [sic] is likely to face race-associated prejudice; second, since he [sic] is considered a foreigner, he [sic] is subject to the attitudes directed toward foreigners regardless of race; third, because some

Britons associate coloured people with ‘extremely low social status’, he [sic] may suffer class discrimination (9). The attitude of the British toward the strangers was illustrated in the statement by one respondent: ‘I dislike discrimination but I am obliged to practice it’ (qtd in Glass 110). This ambivalence stems from the attitude to the colonies which was not only one of impersonal authority, but it had some ingredients of a family relationship. This was demonstrated when people from the empire came to Britain and found they were viewed both with suspicion (dark strange exotic) and also with pride as a symbol of the far-reaching power of the empire. Overall the attitude to the strangers was that of superiority, the foreigner was inferior and was not really regarded as British (Glass 109).

In the early 60s this contradiction was beginning to be reversed just as the flow of migration was reversed and fewer white Englishmen were making their careers as administrators of dependent territories. The old ideology of colonialism with its connotations of prejudice was on its way out in the new Commonwealth, and was becoming more noticeable in the ‘mother country’. Multi-racial harmony was more a theme for export than for import (Glass 110).

Indeed, Lady Selvedge’s attitude features all three factors: her initial reaction to seeing ‘so many black people’ is shock; this feeling then gives way to fond memories of yams which she associates with Sir Humphrey, her late former husband, and the time that they spent in Nigeria. This recollection eases her anxiety as she places the strangers in a more comfortable and familiar context of her experience in the colonies; finally her bigoted class consciousness is demonstrated by her ‘penetrating’ voice and her talking about the immigrants while ignoring their presence.

The juxtaposition of Lady Selvedge’s encounter with the black people in the scene that follows, in which she opens the charity bazaar and in her speech encourages the people present to give contribution to the parish church, is ironic. This bazaar may well have been for the benefit of the parish poor, some of whom she has snubbed in the street on her way to the church. Lady Selvedge is presented as an unsympathetic character, a relic of the old social order, but it is up to the reader to make the connection and conclude that it is easier to make charity speeches than to show real tolerance.

Pym suggests that tolerance is a difficult virtue to attain and even more challenging to demonstrate as illustrated in the following passage:

Whenever [Daisy] entered a café she always felt obliged to choose a table where a coloured man or woman was already sitting, so that they should not feel slighted in any way. Looking around now she saw a table for four with an African already at it. Then she noticed that a clergyman, also bearing a tray, was making for the same table, but she managed to get there before him and put her bag down on the chair next to her to prevent him from sitting down. One never knew—he might be a Roman Catholic or Oxford Group; it did not occur to her that he too might be trying to show the black man that there was no colour bar here.

He gave her a somewhat hostile stare as she crashed her tray down on the table.

'Anyone sitting here?' she asked brightly.

He made a slight movement of his head and went on reading his book which had an abstruse legal title. (235–36)

This slightly absurd anecdote provides an example of how members of the community seem to bend over backwards to seem friendly to newcomers. However, feeling obliged to sit next to a 'coloured man or woman' suggests that this is not done entirely out of free will. Daisy's eagerness also reveals that she regards coloured people as strangers or guests who ought to be made to feel welcome. She is so busy with her mission that she is unaware of the man's 'hostile stare'. Daisy's efforts are undermined by her lack of sensitivity (and suspicion of the clergyman), and this scene suggests that forced kindness may be the other side of biased stereotyping.

In contrast to Daisy, Mark Ainger and his wife adopt a less proactive approach to draw in the newcomers:

Mark had been visiting, trying to establish some kind of contact with his exotic parishioners and hoping to discover likely boys and men to sing in the choir and serve at the altar. He had received several enthusiastic offers, though he wondered how many of them would really turn up in church. (16)

Mark's attitude is an example of what the sociologist, Sheila Patterson, terms 'benevolent laissez-faire' (1963 258), which was typical behaviour of many clergymen at that time in Britain. His only contact with the new residents occurs when he visits their homes for the purpose of recruiting 'boys and men to sing in the choir and serve at the altar'. Since Mark doubts the sincerity of their 'enthusiastic offers', it appears that he senses that his visits have not been a success. It is worth noting that in this passage, only the men and the boys are invited. Albert Hyndman suggests that in 1960s England the living conditions of the majority of the migrants prevented them from regular church participation. Women found it especially difficult to organise their domestic responsibilities well enough to get sufficient time for worship (78).

Rupert Stonebird, an anthropologist and a new member of the congregation, alludes to Mark's failure to address the needs of the newcomers by comparing these visits to the unwanted prying of anthropologists. He believes that the priest brings them '[s]omething they don't always want' (210). Judging by Daisy's earlier disappointment upon hearing that anthropologists do not actually do anything 'for the welfare of these poor people' (41) whom they investigate, it seems that for some ministers the West Indian population is little more than an opportunity for a field trip.

Mark's ambivalent attitude towards the strangers is further revealed during a conversation with his wife and Ianthe. To the latter's inquiry as to whether tropical fruits are proper for the Harvest Thanksgiving, he responds: 'Certainly — they're really most appropriate here'. The open-mindedness of this statement is undermined when Sophia quotes from Reginald Heber's missionary hymn,

‘From Greenland’s Icy Mountains’.⁷ She only quotes two innocuous lines, ‘What though the spicy breezes / Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle’ (32). However, for readers familiar with the rest of the hymn,

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| 1. From Greenland’s icy mountains
From India’s coral strand;
Where Afric’s sunny fountains
Roll down their golden sand:
From many an ancient river,
From many a palmy plain,
They call us to deliver
Their land from error’s chain. | 2. What though the spicy breezes
Blow soft o’er Ceylon’s isle;
Though every prospect pleases,
And only man is vile?
In vain with lavish kindness
The gifts of God are strown;
The heathen in his blindness
Bows down to wood and stone. |
|--|--|

quoting this hymn suggests that, like Heber, the Aingers view themselves as missionaries working among the heathens.⁸ According to Patterson, this attitude was especially problematic as the West Indians were very sensitive about anything that smacked of missionary approach. One of their ministers told the sociologist: ‘After all, we’ve been Christians for hundreds of years. We even send missionaries to Africa ourselves’ (254).

Sophia’s yearning for the glorious days of the empire (‘how one longs for the days of Bishop Heber sometimes!’ 32), further attests to her dissatisfaction with her lot in the parish. Heber’s hymn in this context emphasises the discrepancy between the vocation of the romantic colonial priest and that of the modern-day priest, while also pointing out the inadequacy of missionary ideals.

This approach is demonstrated again in a humorous conversation between the Reverend Randolph Burdon, his wife Bertha, and their niece Ianthe:

- ‘I suppose St. Basil’s is a poor parish?’ Randolph asked in an almost hopeful tone.
- ‘Yes,’ said Ianthe ‘The congregation tends to be a poor one and there are quite a number of coloured people living in the district’.
- Randolph sighed. ‘If only I had that opportunity — such a rewarding experience working among people of that type.’
- ‘But they are much more naturally religious than we are,’ said Ianthe. ‘It is the white people who are the heathen.’
- ‘No dear, you must be mistaken,’ said Bertha in a pained tone. (92)

This scene suggests that Randolph Burdon and his wife, ministering in a wealthy part of town, know very little about the immigrants and their religious beliefs. Yet they do not give up their romantic ideas about working in poor immigrant parishes; Burdon appears to be genuinely longing for this calling.

This conversation echoes contemporaneous cultural debate. While the mainstream public often doubted the sincerity of the West Indians’ Christian beliefs, according to Pastor Clifford Hill, many of the immigrants were disappointed with Church worship in England. He further laments that the ‘English, who originally carried the Gospel to the West Indies, do not believe, or practice what they have preached’ and the ‘widespread paganism that exists in England under the thin

vener of Christianity' (103). Pym's portrayal of empty Anglican Churches struggling to attract believers supports this claim, and Ianthe's bold assertion that it is the white people who are heathen suggests a growing scepticism regarding the genuineness of common beliefs.

Churches have traditionally played a crucial role in facilitating the early stages of adjustment of immigrants to the new environment by lending them spiritual, social and material assistance (Patterson 1963 252). Yet, the church in *An Unsuitable Attachment* does not offer such aid. Although Mark has rejected a living in the wealthier parish of St. Ermine's, preferring to work with the poor, his inadequate ideas about the newcomers and his lack of resolve in drawing them into the church render him ineffectual. Consequently, the relationship between the church and the newcomers remains static: they do not begin to attend church or to join the activities of the parish.

The inability to reach out and to 'see' the other is not limited to Mark's relationship with the West Indians. When Sophia discovers that, contrary to her expectations, the spinster Ianthe intends to marry the 'unsuitable' John Callow, she realises that she only thought she knew Ianthe. Because of her biases, Sophia was unable to see that Ianthe had other needs and wishes; she must have, in her own words, left out 'the human element' (226). Indeed, from the private to the public sphere, *An Unsuitable Attachment* demonstrates disregard for the need of the other and neglect of that human element.⁹

In the fictional world, even mistakes and misunderstandings resulting from partial blindness can ultimately be worked out, especially if true love, however unsuitable, is present. But in the case of the West Indians Pym manifests a genuine social concern and, while subtly exploring the confusion, anxiety and ignorance on the issue within English society, she offers no happy ending. In a parish where so many of the residents are West Indians, they remain at the geographical margins — as well as in a world apart.

A broadcast describing the West Indians' experience of public and private life in England by BBC Caribbean Service (1958–59) illustrates the irreconcilable differences between the two worlds. Under the topic of 'Making Friends at Church' appears the following suggestion, which could have been taken directly from *An Unsuitable Attachment*:

Some people will go out of their way to try and make you comfortable. Many may believe you have never gone to a real church before and they are trying to make you like what they think is your first experience. Do not insult them for this ignorance. They will learn better in time... Sometimes they decide to give you credit for being truly converted ... simply because they may have it in their heads that colored people are heathens who break the hearts of saintly missionaries who try to convert them.

(qtd in Glass 100)

An Unsuitable Attachment does not present the point of view of the West Indians themselves. Throughout the novel they remain a silent entity never to be personalised, and this absence emphasises the problem even further. Pym wrote the novel two years after the Notting Hill racial riots of 1958, which she expressly mentions: 'Race relations seemed almost cosy discussed at this distance from Notting Hill or Brixton, Penelope thought scornfully. But that had been last month. Tonight it might be the Common Market or the future of space travel (86).

Having already witnessed some of the consequences of that rift, *An Unsuitable Attachment* reveals an overall pessimistic assessment of the Church's commitment toward improving race relations. Moreover, Pym suggests that in spite of the riots, this topic had not gathered enough momentum to become a priority on the social and political agenda. But rather, in the course of some short three years race relations have been relegated to being yet another topic discussed from afar among well meaning but ineffectual intellectuals.

NOTES

- ¹ See Hilliard 1982, Hastings 1986, Pickering 1989, Reed 2000, and Chapman 2000, 2006.
- ² The American sociologist, Joel S. Kahn, recorded his impressions when he first arrived in London in the 1960s from America: 'I can still remember how shocked I was to find overtly primitivist representations of Blacks in British popular culture, representations that were unthinkable in polite American society of that time. Advertisements for tropical fruit drinks shown in cinemas, for example, depicted happy African natives with prominent lips cavorting through the jungle; the appearance of blacks on the football pitch was inevitably accompanied by chants about jungles and bananas by baying crowds of spectators making ape-like sounds — either of which would have led to riots in contemporary American cities' (139).
- ³ See Raz 2007, p. 5.
- ⁴ According to Clarence Senior and Douglas Manley, until the mid-1950s 'movement to the United Kingdom was unimportant'. Small numbers went as munitions and factory workers, and approximately 8000 joined the armed forces (4).
- ⁵ The Europeans who conquered and colonised the Caribbean brought their religious beliefs with them. The slaves have been converted by missionaries (Moravians, Methodists and Baptists) from the mid-eighteenth century. At first the Anglican planters viewed them with hostility as they feared unrest among the slaves but near the end of the eighteenth century the British government adopted a more positive policy towards the conversion of slaves (see Manley 45).
- ⁶ Pym's description of St Basil's location corresponds in Glass' map of West Indian Settlement in London to an area in which 4% to 8% of the immigrant population lived.
- ⁷ Reginald Heber (1783–1826) was an English bishop; in November 1804 he was elected a fellow of All Souls'; after completing his university career, he went on a long tour of Europe. Having taken holy orders in 1807, he took up the family living of Hodnet in Shropshire. In 1823 he became the Bishop of Calcutta. The hymn was published in 1819.
- ⁸ It seems that Pym's attitude towards missionary work evolves throughout the decade: in *Excellent Women*, missionary work overseas is regarded as an important cause. Mildred, the protagonist, even imagines herself as a local Christian missionary who

awaits opportunities for 'saying a word' and propagating the gospel, as her vicar always urges his parishioners to do (9). In contrast to the general congenial attitude, only one eccentric character in the novel, Mrs. Bone (who is characterised as 'not a Christian' — meaning she is not a churchgoer), is a single voice in her dissent against the work of the missionaries in Africa. She protests against their condescension towards the natives, claiming that 'Missionaries have done a lot of harm' as the 'natives have their own religions which are very ancient, much more ancient than ours. We,' she says, 'have no business to try to make them change' (140). Although Mrs. Bone is presented as an eccentric, and her peculiar opinions concerning other topics undermine her credibility and create 'considerable confusion' in the mind of Mildred (140), this early manifestation of a post-colonial position, expressed by an unconventional character, questions the moral foundation of missionary work in Africa.

Although none of the other characters in Pym's novels of that period express views similar to those of Mrs. Bone's, the next novel, *Jane and Prudence*, displays a general fatigue with the cause of colonial Africa. When the vicar Nicholas Cleveland and his wife Jane return from their vacation, they discover that the locum priest's sermons were 'not much well liked'. Miss Doggett, a prominent member of the congregation and a member of the Parochial Church Council (131), explains the reason for this: 'We got very tired of Africa and I didn't feel that what he told us rang quite true. He said that one African chief had had a thousand wives. I found that a little difficult to believe' (*Jane and Prudence* 213).

Towards the middle of the decade missionary work overseas ceases to be a recurring motif in Pym's novels. Africa is becoming instead a field of anthropological studies, whereas the centre of missionary work is actually London.

- ⁹ Similar examples are the notion of both Rupert and Mervyn that they could be suitable husbands for Ianthe, without considering her feelings in the matter, and the officious social worker who presumes to know what is best for her charge Mrs. Grime.

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